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SUBJECT: MOVING PAST THE SIXTH GRADE - GUINEA'S EDUCATION GAP

REF: CONAKRY 1215

¶1. SUMMARY. A recent poloff road trip to Upper Guinea provided useful insights into Guinea's crippled education system, illustrating the considerable obstacles that contribute to the country's ongoing struggle to improve literacy and basic education. In the prime minister's hometown, most children do not have access to education beyond the sixth grade level. Inadequate infrastructure and a lack of quality teachers pose significant barriers to progress. At the University of Kankan, students asked hard hitting questions, indicating that despite a lack of resources, they are engaged and taking advantage of what they do have in order to maximize their educational opportunities. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Poloff met with school officials in Kouroussa (the prime minister's hometown) and visited three classrooms of middle and high school students. The following day, poloff gave a brief presentation on civic responsibility to a group of 60 students at the University of Kankan, which was followed by a 90-minute question and answer session.

BREAKING PAST THE SIXTH GRADE BARRIER

¶3. Public school administrators in Kouroussa detailed a laundry list of complaints that focused mainly on the district's lack of adequate infrastructure and problems in attracting and retaining quality educators. The group reported that the prefecture has about 23,000 students enrolled through the sixth grade (10,000 of which were girls), but only 4,300 enrolled above the sixth grade level (1,300 of which were girls). When asked to explain the gap, educators said that they simply lack the infrastructure to accommodate students, pointing out that while each district has at least one elementary school, there is only one high school for the entire prefecture. One teacher added that for many children who want to go beyond the sixth grade, the only option is to move and try to get into a school in another prefecture.

¶4. On the question of quality educators, the group reported that the prefecture employs a total of 543 teachers of which 331 are contractors. (Note: Nationwide, more than half of Guinea's teachers are contracted, which means that they are generally paid less and receive minimal benefits (reftel). End Note.) One administrator said that the Ministry of Education keeps sending them contractors, but that they generally do not stay for long because the living conditions are so difficult given the prefecture's reputation as one of the poorest in the country. Another added that villages often have to provide food, lodging and other assistance to the contractors because they are inadequately and infrequently paid - assistance that many villages are tired of providing, he said. The group noted that contractors earn an average of \$36 a month while tenured teachers earn at least twice that amount.

¶5. After the meeting, poloff visited three middle and high school classrooms and found over one hundred students crammed into each room, squeezed together as they shared rickety benches and desks. There were no textbooks. Teachers taught their lectures from their

own notebooks of handwritten notes on specific subjects. The students were an eager audience and quickly raised their hands as they asked a number of questions about the U.S. education system and opportunities for studying there. Illustrating the challenges the students themselves face, one young man in the very back of the room asked: "How do we convince our parents that it is important that we go to school?"

KANKAN'S UNIVERSITY STUDENTS EAGER FOR KNOWLEDGE

¶16. At the University of Kankan, Guinea's second largest university, Poloff met with the Rector, as well as a visiting U.S. Fulbright professor and a number of other professors and administrators. The rector said that the school's current enrollment is 8,000. He added that the university had recently issued a policy requiring all students to live off campus, freeing up former dormitory facilities that are now being converted into classrooms. According to the rector, the university will be able to accommodate another 3,000 students, but that additional professors are necessary, especially since many of the current staff are quickly approaching retirement. He said the school is expanding its teaching facilities in order to respond to upward pressure from the high schools for university spots.

¶17. A brief conversation with a visiting U.S. Fulbright professor who had arrived in Kankan about six weeks earlier revealed that in general, the university did not use textbooks. She noted that most of the teaching is done based on lecture notes and that a "culture of reading" generally does not exist - most students are not used to picking up a book.

¶18. During a dynamic 90-minute session with university students,

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poloff fielded a wide range of questions dealing with everything from U.S. educational opportunities, to visa questions, to U.S. foreign policy in Iraq, Iran and other parts of the world. There were a number of tough questions, which indicated that despite a lack of resources, students were well-informed on current events and international affairs.

COMMENT

¶19. This trip, which provided a detailed snapshot of the education system in just one of Guinea's 33 prefectures, illustrates the inherent problems that plague the country's efforts to improve literacy and education in general. In Kouroussa, only 18 percent of students have access to education beyond the sixth grade, a figure that does not include the students who simply cannot afford to go to school in the first place. Without access to basic education, many of Guinea's future generations face limited economic opportunities. Furthermore, lack of education creates barriers to progress in general, in terms of both democracy and prosperity, as fewer citizens have an opportunity to learn about basic civic education, human rights, health, and other basic subjects. Closing Guinea's education gap will be critical to advancing the country's development. END COMMENT.

CARTER